

WILLIAM A. LITTLE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
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TYREE SCOTT
FORMER PRESIDENT, CENTRAL CONTRACTORS ASSOCIATION
FORMER PRESIDENT, UNITED CONSTRUCTION WORKERS ASSOCIATION

INTERVIEWEE: TYREE SCOTT

INTERVIEWERS: WILLIAM LITTLE

SUBJECTS: ELECTRICIANS; BLACK WORKERS; WHITE WORKERS; TRADE UNIONS; TRADE UNION BUREAUCRACY; RACISM; ORGANIZING; DEMANDS; UNITED CONSTRUCTION WORKERS ASSOCIATION; MARXISM; AGITATION

LOCATION: SEATTLE, WASHINGTON

DATE: DECEMBER 22, 1975

INTERVIEW LENGTH: 00:22:04

FILE NAME: ScottTyree_WLOHP_19751222_Audio_acc2610-003.mp3

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[00:00:00] **TYREE:** We've got about 125 Black electricians. The trade union that they all belong to is [International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers] Local 46. I say they, I mean we, myself included. Our union is a democratic union that has an income of let's say a million dollars per year. I don't know if I'm getting that figure right, but let's say one million dollars a year. The question we had to raise was what do we do with that one million dollars a year? What do the white workers benefit out of it? What do the Black workers benefit out of it? What other kind of power muscle does the trade union have? What's the role white workers play in it?

So when we look at that, you see that in fact, white workers play the same role that Black workers play, and it is almost nothing. They allow the union to bargain for higher wages for them, and the unions never, almost never,

or when they do, in a very passive way, involve themselves in any political question except for the question of economics, the question of higher wages for its members. So it is not unusual for a white worker to be fifteen years in the local union and to never have gone to a union meeting for fourteen years. That's not an unusual situation at all. And so by this low participation in the union, he has, in effect, delegated the authority, delegated the power he has as a united worker to the union bureaucrats. The union bureaucrat more often than not sees his primary role as the accomplishment of increased wages for the members. They also negotiate about working conditions, the question of what time do you go to work between seven and eight o'clock. Between seven-thirty and eight, you can pick up two. They demanded that the employer have to furnish wrenches and tools over two inches, and the workers furnishes the small hand tools, for example. And those kinds of things get negotiated. I mean, there are other things, too.

Let's just talk about one bad example: health benefits. George Meany has given lip service to socialized medicine for the last ten years. Yet, trade union members in my local have to work three hundred hours per quarter in order to be eligible for my insurance benefits to set the next quarter. Now, I might work only two hundred hours, or two hundred and fifty hours, or two hundred and eighty hours, and I can't even receive health benefits the following quarter. So I might be insured, my whole family might be insured for a particular three months, but because conditions were bad, the three months they were out I might've been unemployed, or I might've been unemployed one and a half out of those three months, so I'm not covered by any insurance. So not only is the broader community not getting socialized medicine, but union members, in fact, are getting sold out by insurance companies and union bureaucrats. That's the result of non-participation by trade union members in the trade unions.

So we say, okay, there's 125 Blacks in the trade union in Seattle. We have by no means united the 125 Blacks. They might have gone to the union directly—well, they did, in fact, go into the union directly as a result of the struggle put on by the CCA [Central Contractors Association] and the UCWA [United Construction Workers Association]. However, they tend not to see UCWA or the CCA, sometimes not as a viable force, other times they simply don't want to get involved in it, but it's ok. So it's necessary for us to unite with as many of those Black workers as we can. They have to become active participants in the trade unions. The trade union is very key in the construction situation, much more so than it is in an industrial situation. We call it a closed shop. So by that, Joe Schmoe can't come down to a construction site and ask the electricians anyway, ask the foreman or superintendent for a job. He can only go to the job if he is a member of the trade union. The trade union, in fact, controls your ability to work or not to work. So he sees it as being a viable force.

So what we asked these guys to do is to take part in the trade union meetings and stuff. A guy can say, "Well, why should I do that? I'm working anyway, I pay my dues, and when I'm out of work, I sign the list, and I go out." I'd have to characterize them as backward workers, backwards people. But then the white worker, I just finished talking about him, fifteen years in the union, fourteen years since he's been to a meeting, so he out categorizes him. It's also a main factor. So we have that the majority of those workers, both Black ones and white ones, who by and large are exactly the same. Neither one of them takes part in the trade union situation.

However, at the same time, there is a small core of white workers who attend all the trade union meetings. They are by no means united, and they go down there for different reasons. Some of them, as a matter of fact, they got right wing, they got a center group, and a left wing inside the union. The left wing tries to put forward what they consider to be more progressive issues. They talk about the role the trade union played in allowing corporations to go abroad and thereby taking work from people here. The center, the middle-of-the-road kind of trade union people, can be characterized as those people who fight for purity in trade union kind of politics. They raise issues like pre-fabricated housing will cut down on jobs, union jobs. Then there's the right. The right,

the little bit I know about it at this point, tends not to see its primary goal as racist, but sees it important to limit the amount of folks coming into the trade union. They tend to be the older, more conservative types of men. They fight, they spend—I mean, he might be a guy who will go and look for some guy and ask to see his union card, his union dues, see if he is working on a job somewhere to make sure that he was legally dispatched out. And he's doing that kind of activity in support of the trade unions. So they're supportive of the union, and they're supportive of the way things always used to be. Now, they might be obviously supportive of the union, but then what's the role of the union itself? That's not defined.

Those of us who now can be characterised as progressive Black workers, who may be ten people. Let me put some numbers on this. That group I just talked about, the total people who go, it's probably more like fifty, sixty people, basically all white. Now, I talk about how we've got a hundred and twenty Black electricians. Twenty of those Black electricians are relatively progressive, I know it personally, I've either worked with them or been close to them at UCWA.

The plan we have in working with this is to try and bring together five or six of those Black workers who we consider to be progressive enough who will sit down and study the role of the trade unions, the history of the trade unions, the role and history of our particular international and our particular local union, and then talk about the role that we should be playing. And so we tend to then develop positions and strategies among ourselves, that we then take to the union hall. Now those strategies—and this is probably the most important part of how we see our work being done—the white workers at the union hall who we can clearly unite with, who may be more progressive than us, but at least as progressive as us. It's also important—and this is equally important—that we talk about this. The sheet metal workers, the electricians that I've been talking with, that it's very important for us to be able to put forward positions that the white workers can't construe to be Black issues. If in fact our class analysis is right, what is good for us is also good for them.

So, if we are able to put forward positions, and or explain positions put forward to other people—for example, 314, the tax that they were trying to pass, I find it really ironic the way big business was able to do an advertising campaign convincing working people that it wasn't in their interest to tax corporations to pay for education. Never once was somebody able, even the businessman of the union, who's more of a center kind of person, didn't understand the issue, didn't have the ability to articulate it. He was talking to me about if we get more involved in politics, we'll have some political leverage and thereby be able to talk to the city councilmembers, certain city councilmembers. I said to him, "If we get more politically active, we'll have members of this local in the city council." You see, he's still got the mentality that we'll run a lawyer for the city council. He didn't understand that if you run a worker for the city council, he can best serve the needs of the workers, instead of lawyers.

So getting back to these five or six Black electricians, we can convince three or four other electricians all the time to go to union meetings, who are not particularly progressive, but who would understand the issues that we had articulated in the union hall. So there might be five progressive Black electricians and five progressive white electricians at the union meeting who are able to put forward and explain issues to the rest of the workers, who would then take a position and move on it. Let me give you an example, a concrete example: In the state of Washington, an employee can not sue an employer for gross negligence. I might be working on a job somewhere, and the employer neglected to put up a railing on a twenty-foot building, and somebody falls off of it, I fall off of it, and I'm killed, or I'm not killed, I'm damaged severely, broken spine or something. The only thing that I got coming to me then is workmen's compensation, state workmen's compensation. The employer doesn't lose a thing, yet it was his negligence that caused me to fall. Well, that's not in the interest of any workers. So we don't put that out as a racist situation, white workers can also fall. We put it forward as an issue

workers should be able to unite around. It doesn't get put forward at a trade union meeting, and when it gets put forward, it's not researched and explained or written in such a manner that it is carried through to the point that it becomes legislation.

So that's the role that I see us playing initially. The more you do that, I think you're able to bring along more and more workers, get them to build a stronger base inside the trade union. Those kinds of unions can go out on strike, for example, and if necessary stop the construction in this city for long periods of time, and thereby taking more power from management and giving it to workers.

[BREAK IN RECORDING OF INTERVIEW]

...it's going to have a profound impact upon this society. Every time that you chip away something and you're able to show the workers that that's the kind of power that they have. You first start taking some controls from the employers. That might be having enough unity inside the union to carry out a strike for a long period of time, so that it has some effect on the industry and takes some power. Individually, those of us who are saying to the workers that in fact, we're the ones who produce it, we're the ones who, without us, those trucks would sit idle, without us those heaters would never produce heat, and without us those lines would never carry a current. Eventually, what we are talking about is not having employers at all, of course. We're talking about taking it all, but I'm talking about the immediate steps. I think that in the states on the left, everybody assumes that you can take it even now, but I think that it is important that workers are able to chip away at the power until they realize and recognize that they have the power themselves, and that's who they are. I think there has to be an educational process along the way.

[00:16:22] **WILLIAM:** So what you're suggesting is incremental change, incremental process to change.

[00:16:30] **TYREE:** Well, yeah. Let's look back at UCWA again. What we did, in essence, now there's six other cities besides this town that have a workers movement, that are moving in the direction that we're moving in. We're working in one local trade union now, the electricians local, trying to see on what basis Black workers and white workers can unite. I just laid out what worked. If in fact that worked, you then talk about it inside the labor council in the whole city. If that works, workers in Little Rock, Arkansas, workers in Shreveport, Louisiana, workers in Tyler, Texas, are then taking on and trying to do the same kind of thing.

I think that when certain economic conditions change in this country, that will force the workers to look for alternative positions. I also believe that those economic conditions are getting to the point that it's going to force the working people in this country to look for alternatives. And I hope that by the time people who are now looking at the role of trade unions and the role workers play in this country will be able to put forward an alternative. That's what we're talking about now.

[BREAK IN RECORDING OF INTERVIEW]

...workers should own and control the means of production, and the thing should be done through the state, rather than some employer, for the benefit all the working people. I mean to say that, that's got to be our goal, but I think there's steps in terms of getting there. Rather than saying, "We are going to march tomorrow and get freedom now," I think those are real pragmatic kinds of steps. Because what we're dealing with now is the trade union leaders who think that it's important to send a lawyer to the city council. What we suggested, what I'm suggesting is that we have to overcome that first by showing that a worker can, in fact, be elected by workers

and can, in fact, perform. So not to sit on the city council can be our goal, but to take control of this country has to be our goal.

[00:19:23] **WILLIAM:** Okay, anything else?

[00:19:26] **TYREE:** No, I just didn't want to leave that out, I thought that—

[BREAK IN RECORDING OF INTERVIEW]

...just going on, just the heat that can take your place, heating the water. But the water, pretty soon you see bubbles coming up, those small bubbles coming out the bottom and the top, and so on. And then pretty soon, when the water gets so hot, it slowly starts to boil. And once it starts to boil, it's a very rapid process, then it goes. That process, I think that we have to first heat it up, and heating it up becomes like the educational process, the process of making something work. So it's slow and tedious, but if we look at the history of any successful revolution in any country, with the exception of maybe places like Cuba, the process is a thirty, forty year process. It's not a two or three or four year process as people in this country tend to look for. So I think we are just in the process of starting to warm the water. And I consider the economic situation, when it makes its turn for the worst, to cause the process to heat it up much more, because people start looking for alternatives. And once they find those alternatives, they start to put forward their own demands. That's the boiling process.

I think that people have to be much clearer on how international economic processes work and what the international economic conditions are. We were very close to economic chaos just this past year. And I think that they were able to forestall it for some period of time, but it will be back again. And each time, we have to increase the amount of progressive workers who are looking for demands that relate to working people, and I consider that to be a lot more little bubbles starting to come up. That make sense to you?

[00:21:59] **WILLIAM:** Yeah.